

He was sweating, drops winding their way along the dirt and the furrows on his face, dripping off the tip of his stubby nose. The fear in his eyes lay naked and bare and his breathing came in panicked shallow gulps, if she held on much longer the bastard would pass out from lack of oxygen.

She held him firmly locked in her gaze, her arm extended and the gun pointed dead at him, her grip on the ivory handle was firm but relaxed and the barrel was steady as a rock, not even a hint of shaking. She could see his beady eyes dart to the gun in the dust on the ground, looking desperately for an out that wasn't there. He'd go for it. At some point he had to, it was his last desperate out. She smiled, a cold smile, daring him to do it. She could feel the ghosts rise behind her, their freezing chains on her soul, their whispered voices on the wind. Behind the mountains to her left the storm was rolling in, thunder rumbling in the distance, the smell of ozone in the air.

He went for it, a clumsy move, far too slow and much too desperate. She pulled the trigger calm and firm, felt the kickback down her arm, the muzzle flash blinding in the nighttime dark, the smell of gunpowder hitting her nostrils. He yelped like a kicked dog and folded over, hitting the ground in a cloud of dust. A loud thunderclap echoed across the hills, lightning coiling through the steel blue clouds and striking the mountain peaks. With a tear the skies opened and the rain began to pour as the wind howled in from the east.

She walked towards him, spurs making furrows in her wake, rain dripping off her hat and steaming off the hot barrel of her ivory handled pistol. He was writhing on the ground like a worm clutching the bleeding wound in his stomach, cursing her with every pained breath. His curses meant nothing to her, she was already a thousand times cursed, one more would make no difference. She put her boot on him and pushed him on to his back, he looked up at her with tears of pain and fear streaming down his face, he cursed her again and tried to spit at her but he failed spectacularly as the bloody phlegm splattered across his own face making watercolor patterns on his cheek with every drop of rain.

She pointed the gun at his face, his curses turned to pleas of mercy. Pleas that fell on deaf ears. He was crying and begging like a child now, nothing new or different there. He would find no mercy in her, there was no quarter to be given. She slowly began to count the rosary beads hanging from her belt, finding calm in the familiar smoothness of the pearls of polished amber.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God"

His pleas turned desperate. Thunder rumbled once more and the storm picked up.

"Pray for us sinners"

The last bead passed through her fingers and her hand clutched around the silver cross dangling from its end. Behind her the wailing of the ghosts grew louder, their cold arms reaching for her, their chains rattling.

"Now and at the hour of our death."

She pulled the trigger, the bang of the gun drowned out by a deafening clash of thunder. His forehead exploded in a cloud of red mist, brains and blood spilling out on the ground beneath him and floating off in the puddles created by the furious rain.

"Amen."

She dropped the cross and it swung gently against her hip. Holstering the still smoking gun she breathed deep, looking out over the vast storm battered plains before buttoning up her leather trenchcoat and pulling the hat down farther on her head to shield her face from the rain as she turned around and made for her horse. Behind her another ghost rose from the ground, another soul to join the Host she dragged behind her, forever shackled to her with chains of ice.

The streets were empty as she rode slowly home, the horses hoofs clattering on the cobblestones and shadows coiling and twisting behind her, a macabre shadowplay on the walls of passing houses. The wind had abated but not the rain and it hissed and sputtered as it died in puffs of smoke on the flickering gaslight lanterns lining the street, she kept her head down and shoulders up to keep the worst of it away, but it did little to help.

She left the horse tied up and warm in the stables and walked the last couple hundred yards through the rain, behind her the shadows stretched and twisted in the gas light, slender ghostly arms reaching for her and undulating forms flowing in her wake. The sound of her spurs against the stone made a sound like the rustle of chains. A stray cat crossed her path, stopped dead in its tracks and for a second stood frozen, its eyes glowing hot in the flickering light of the streetlamps. As she stepped closer it arched its back and hissed, a sound filled with primal terror, then turned tail and ran, bumping in to parked carriages and stumbling over a pile of trash in panicked flight. She shook her head and laughed, a sound entirely bereft of joy. She opened the black iron gate and began walking up the stairs to the whitewalled townhouse she called home.

As soon as the door slammed shut behind her she could feel that something wasn't as it should be. Something was... wrong. The realization sent shards of ice down her spine. It was time. This had been the last. Before the next day dawned she would be gone. The sound of the rain pattering on the windows seemed to get unbearably loud and her pounding heart ached in her chest as she walked towards the kitchen. And there he was. His back towards her, two steaming bowls of stew on the table, one for her and one for him. His shirt was a blood red, his suit and hat spotless and bone white. His long blonde hair was well combed and cascaded down his shoulders. She walked around the table, her movements tense, every muscle like a loaded spring ready to snap. His pale yellow eyes followed her as she made her way to the chair opposite him. He stroked his blonde goatee and gestured for her to sit. She did.

"Welcome home my dear."

He smiled. There were lies behind that smile, a million lies and one.

"Morningstar."

He nodded. They ate in silence, the only sound their slurping and the ever present rattle of chains at her back.

"You have gathered quite a host. But the weight of all those chains..."

There was a hint of actual pity in his voice.

"I took the last this evening. Didn't realize he was until just now."

He nodded. She felt a ball of ice growing in the pit of her stomach. She had always thought she'd be ready when the time came, now she wasn't so sure.

"And so I come to collect."

"Will it be fair?"

Her voice was shaking now.

"As fair as these things can be. All things considered."

She nodded in silence.

"How long?"

"One hour. Dawn approaches."

She got up.

"Then I had better ready myself."

She ignored whatever response he gave and left the room.

It was still raining when she stepped in to the empty street outside her home. On the horizon a small glimmer of red morning light glowed through the stormclouds. He stood at the far end of the street, that damned white suit shining like fire in the flickering light of the gaslamps. The rain didn't seem to touch him, but it sure touched her. She was soaked, cold wet clothes clinging to her skin.

He didn't sweat, his eyes were steady and he stood perfectly still. She could feel beads forming on her own forehead, could feel her hands shaking slightly. She grasped the rosary. Felt a calm at the familiar touch.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners. Now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

He shook his head.

"He won't help you, you know."

"I know."

Then everything happened fast. She drew and shot in one motion, the gun kicking back in her hand, felt gunpowder on her face. Gunpowder and something else, something wet, hot and sticky. Saw a cloud of red expand from her chest and then she was falling, head hitting the cobbles with a crack. Her vision burred and the air was knocked from her lungs. Then as her vision began to return and the pain in her chest began to burn she heard it, loud and clear. The sound of a thousand chains snapping.

"Shit..."

